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Military Order



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of the



United States



COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.



WAR PAPER 25½

The Last Days of the Rebel Iron-Clad
Merrimac and Occupation of Norfolk,
as seen from the U. S. S.
Susquehanna.



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PREPARED BY COMPANION

Acting Master

ALFRED L. B. ZEREGA,

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Late U. S. N.,

AND

READ AT THE STATED MEETING OF FEBRUARY 3, 1897.

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The Last Days of the Rebel Iron-Clad *Merrimac* and Occupation of Norfolk, as seen from the U. S. S. *Susquehanna*.

The U. S. Steam Frigate *Susquehanna* had been some days in Hilton Head Harbor when on April 27, 1862, the captain, James L. Lardner, received orders to proceed to Hampton Roads and report to Flag Officer L. M. Goldsborough for duty in York river in connection with the Army of the Peninsula.

We steamed out of Hilton Head the evening of the 28th and arrived at Lynn Haven Bay, just outside of Hampton Roads, on the 29th at about 9 P. M., and after exchanging signals with the flag-ship anchored.

The next morning found us in company with the flag-ship *Minnesota*, the *San Jacinto*, *Seminole*, *St. Lawrence*, *Monitor*, and the iron clads *Galena* and *Naugatuck*; the latter attached to the revenue service, also quite a fleet of army transports—all expecting the dreaded *Merrimac* to come out at any moment and make an attack on the fleet.

Captain Lardner reported to the flag officer who ordered us to remain where we were and participate in the fight when the *Merrimac* came out.

Up to May 2d we lay at anchor waiting, like Micawber, for something to turn up. About 9 A. M. a tug from the flag-ship notified the squadron and transports that the *Merrimac* was coming. We immediately prepared ship for

action, spread fires, hove short, went to quarters and waited for orders. Whilst so waiting another tug came alongside bringing two "one hundred pounder" Parrott rifles and ammunition; got the guns on board and mounted in broadside as part of the second division. At the announcement by the flag-ship tug that the *Merrimac* was coming, the sailing vessels and most of the army transports got under way and stood out towards the Capes of Virginia. Sure enough, the bugbear did come down the Elizabeth river as far as Sewells Point; remained there until about 4 P. M. and then returned up the river.

During the 3d there was more or less heavy cannonading in the direction of Yorktown, and the same early on Sunday morning, the 4th of May. At 9. A. M. the flag-ship made signal: "Yorktown is ours." During divine service Dr. Joseph Beale, the chief surgeon, offered a very impressive thanksgiving prayer for the success accorded our army. As usual the *Merrimac* steamed down as far as Sewells Point, remained the usual time and retired up the Elizabeth river.

From the 4th to the 7th we were still like our old friend Micawber, the *Merrimac* coming down every day as far as Sewells Point, remaining until evening and then going back.

On the 7th President Lincoln arrived at Fortress Monroe. That afternoon the flag officer, with Captains Case and Poor, came on board to witness our practice with the 100-pounder rifles. That practice was to throw a lot of shells into the batteries on Sewells Point in which we were assisted by the guns on the Rip Raps.

On the morning of the 8th of May we received signal orders to prepare for action. In so short a time that it is hardly expressible we were all ready and awaiting further orders. None having come, a little after 11 A. M. Captain Lardner

ordered that the ship's company take a snack, which we were very thankful to get. Just before noon we received the signal message we were waiting for, and moved up toward Sewells Point, followed by the *San Jacinto*, *Seminole*, *Monitor*, *Dacotah*, and the revenue ironclad *Naugatuck*. As soon as in range we opened fire on Sewells Point, and about half past one anchored in front of the batteries and poured in shell as fast as able to load and fire. The return fire was very poor and did little or no damage, as nearly all the rebel shot and shell either fell short of or passed over us.

During the firing Acting Master W. L. Churchill, in command of the after pivot gun, came to the hurricane deck and reported that sabots and pieces of shell from the *Naugatuck*, which was anchored outside of us, were falling on our deck and likely to injure some of the men of his division.

Captain Lardner, turning to Mr. Weaver, asked, "Who commands the *Naugatuck*?" Without thinking and on the spur of the moment I replied, * * * "What do you mean, sir?" "I beg your pardon, Captain, but that is the only name any of us know him by."

In the wardroom we had given him this nick-name owing to an incident which occurred when he was first lieutenant of the revenue cutter *Harriet Lane*, while she was aground on Hatteras Bar the year before, and we were assisting in getting her afloat.

Captain Lardner with a smile turned to Mr. Churchill, ordered him to take a boat and go on board the *Naugatuck*, give Captain * * * his (Lardner's) compliments, and say to Captain * * * that if he did not cease firing over us the *Susquehanna* would give the *Naugatuck* a broadside and sink her.

Mr. Churchill carried out the order whereupon she changed

position and we were not again bothered by the fire from the *Naugatuck*.

During the action two "incendiary" shells were fired from the after pivot gun, and one of them exploding inside of the fort set some wood work afire. The firing from the fort ceased, but only for a few minutes. Several times we thought the rebel batteries had been silenced, but they were not. A little after 2 P. M. the *Merrimac* was seen coming down the river, so we got under way and moved out where more sea room could be had. As we turned the batteries again opened on us; but were soon silenced. The *Seminole*, *San Jacinto*, and the other vessels followed us out into deep water.

As soon as sea room was had we turned round, heading for the channel, and waited for the *Merrimac* who came at us intending to serve us as she served the *Congress* and *Cumberland*—ram and dispose of us at once.

Steering out of her way we tried the same game, but were not any more successful. For some time we kept manœuvring round each other trying for a chance to ram. Captain Lardner knew that the shot from our pivot 8-inch and rifle guns would be ineffective against the *Merrimac's* armored sides, and that our only hope to do her any injury would be by ramming. Several times the vessels passed almost alongside of each other; neither firing a shot and once the officers on both touched caps to each other.

Before the *Merrimac* got out of the river, we had made preparations to receive her; to ram her if practicable and carry her by boarding if opportunity offered. We had pivoted the two bow 8-inch guns for fire straight ahead; had the two 100-pound rifles trained as near ahead as possible, and laid

two lines of hose from the boilers with the nozzles pointing over the bow, so as to throw boiling water at the instant of impact if we rammed her. The two after guns of the second division (8-inch, 56 hundred weight) were trained fore-and-aft and loaded with double charges of canister, the object being to use them in case our men should be driven back and the fore part of our ship occupied by the enemy. The gun crews of the second and third divisions, armed for boarding, were ranged along the bulwarks so as to be out of the way of any raking fire.

After chasséeing around with the *Merrimac* for some time she hauled off and went under cover of the batteries on Craney Island, where we could not follow owing to the shallow water, and about 5 P. M. she again returned up the Elizabeth river and we to our anchorage outside the Rip Raps. I don't know how Lieut. A. W. Weaver felt when the *Merrimac* started up the river, but I felt that I had gained a new lease of life. As Weaver and I were in command of the boarding party we, of course, would have had to be in the lead, and if the *Merrimac* had been successfully rammed and carried by boarding, it is safe to say that at least one-half of the party would have met instant death.

During the "Balancing to Partners" with the *Merrimac*, the flag-ship kept constantly making signals: "Ram the enemy's ironclad;" "Board the enemy's ironclad;" "Sink the enemy's iron-clad," etc., etc., and I communicated these signals to Captain Lardner until he told me not to bother him with any more signals from the flag-ship, and I obeyed. (The flag-ship was at this time outside the Rip Raps about 8 miles from us.)

On the morning of the 9th we again got under way, anticipating a renewal of the attack on Sewells Point, but, soon

received orders to come to anchor. During the afternoon a large number of troops were embarked on transports to be landed below Sewells Point, the batteries on the Rip Raps meanwhile keeping up a constant fire on Sewells Point and the surrounding woods, but landing was not attempted.

On the 10th President Lincoln visited the flag-ship and afterward proceeded to the transport fleet. Very soon the troops began to land in Lynn Haven Bay. From our ship we could see that the President was very active among the landing party, and it has always been my opinion that Mr. Lincoln himself superintended the building of the temporary pier used. After the landing was effected he passed close by us, and all gave him three cheers while the band played "Hail, Columbia."

On the 11th at 4 A. M. I took charge of the deck, relieving Acting Master Geo. B. Livingston, who reported that a big fire had raged all during his watch (from midnight to 4 A. M.) in the direction of Norfolk, and that a little after 3 A. M. he had noticed another quite large fire more to the right and apparently nearer than the first.

After being on deck for some time, I determined to go aloft and see if I could make out anything about the fires and especially the last one. After watching them awhile with a powerful night glass, I concluded that the last and nearest fire was the *Merrimac* being destroyed, so hailed the deck, giving orders to "Call all hands," "Spread fires," and descended by the topmast bolt-stays. I had hardly reached the deck when Captain Lardner and Executive Officer Weaver asked what was the matter, and were informed that I had been aloft watching the fires and was certain that one of them was caused by the burning of the *Merrimac*. A few minutes afterwards a loud

explosion was heard and the fire to the right seemed to die down a little. By this time it was daylight, and as soon as we had steam got underway and stood off towards Sewells Point. As we passed the flag-ship we were hailed to know where going. Captain Lardner answered: "The *Merrimac* has been blown up; I am going to see about it." Steaming past the Rip Raps we were joined by the *San Jacinto*, *Seminole*, *Dacotah*, *Monitor*, *Naugatuck* and also the army steamer *Mount Vernon*.

On approaching Sewells Point we saw the rebel flag flying on the batteries. Receiving no response to a shell or two fired to say "Howdy," we rounded the Point to enter Elizabeth river and sent a boat on shore. Soon saw our men climbing the bluff and in a minute or two down came the rebel flag and Old Glory once more waved over its own. On the return of the boat we learned that the battery had been evacuated.

Continuing up the Elizabeth river, the prospect was not very encouraging. Right ahead, or rather a little on the starboard bow, on Crany Island, stood quite a large casemated battery, the guns of which completely commanded the channel, and would have us under a raking fire for some time while we could bring but two or three guns to bear. Two rebel flags were flying on the main battery.

A little further up the river we could see several more batteries with their flags flying, as if, of course, they meant to dispute our passage, but nothing could be seen of the *Merrimac*.

By the time we were off Crany Island the *Monitor* and *Naugatuck* had drawn ahead and had not been fired on. The *Mount Vernon* soon sent a boat on shore and found all the batteries deserted. The rebel flags were hauled down and the Stars and Stripes hoisted.

We steamed ahead paying no attention to the various batteries, leaving them to be attended to by the other vessels.

Shortly after passing Crany Island we saw a double row of piles driven in the river across the channel, their tops being just awash, and as we were almost on them signaled the engineer at the bell "to stop her." Captain Lardner and Lieut. Weaver took a good look at the obstruction, whereupon the former gave the order "Ahead full speed" and we crashed through the obstructions without any damage but the loss of one or two of the wooden floats of our paddle-wheels, and as afterwards ascertained stripping off of a few sheets of copper. A little further on we passed a lot of half charred pieces of wood, the remains of the dreaded *Merrimac*.

Steaming on towards the city we soon met a tug-boat manned by a lot of soldiers, who informed us that our troops were in possession.

About 11 A. M. we arrived off Norfolk and came to an anchor just clear of the wharf at the foot of a fine wide street (I think it is called Main street). This street and the adjoining water front were filled with people, principally women and children, watching us.

On communicating with the shore we learned that the city was in possession of the forces under command of Gen. Wool and under the immediate command of Gen. E. L. Vielé.

We had scarcely secured our batteries and gotten the ship in ship-shape when a steamer came up the river with President Lincoln, Gen. Wool, Flag Officer Goldsborough and Captain Case aboard, and the Flag Officer hoisted his flag, on the *Susquehanna*. The President and party went ashore to view the city that Lincoln had captured. I had the honor of accompanying Gen. Wool, the Flag Officer, Captains Lardner and Case as special aid on their visit to the Navy Yard, where

we found everything that was possible of destruction destroyed.

That afternoon our band, as usual during the ward room dinner hour, played a variety of national and other airs, having a large audience on the wharves. Noticing that whenever it played "Hail, Columbia," "Star-Spangled Banner," etc., the women would show signs of displeasure and walk away, we began to amuse ourselves by having it play selections from the Operas, "Dixie," "My Maryland," etc., and when it was evident that the shore audience were very much interested the officer of the deck would make a sign to the bandmaster, who would at once break into "Hail, Columbia," etc. The women soon "caught on" and ceased running away, so after a day or two we entertained them with three fine concerts daily, ending, of course, with one of our national airs.

When we first went on shore the ladies did not receive us very cordially, and when met in the streets would cross over to the other side, at the same time drawing their skirts on one side so as not to be contaminated by contact with a "Yank." Some would put on an extra veil. All this was fun for us, and we got into the habit of drawing our coat-tails on one side on meeting ladies who made any motion to switch their skirts, and if they attempted to put on an extra veil we would all stop, put on eye glasses and stare at them. However, they soon gave up this nonsense, and we were contemplating giving a big ball on the *Susquehanna* and expecting to have all the pretty Norfolk girls as guests when ordered away on other duties.

After getting to Norfolk we were very much astonished that the rebels had allowed it, since they could very easily have prevented.

We found the batteries on Sewells Point much stronger

than expected. They had 61 guns in barbette, besides a small iron casemated battery of 2 guns. The magazines were filled with ammunition.

The batteries on Crany Island mounted 100 guns, a great many in iron protected casemates.

Facing and commanding the obstructions was Fort Pindar mounting 20 guns in iron plated casemates.

At Tanners Creek, farther up, was a small battery mounting 4 guns.

Fort Norfolk, built in 1812, and used as a naval magazine, had been very much strengthened, and was mounted with a set of barbette and casemated guns.

At Hospital Point was another casemated battery mounting 16 long 32-pounders.

It was entirely owing to the landing of the troops in Lynn Haven Bay, by direction of President Lincoln, and the investment of the city by them that the rebels evacuated the place and allowed the navy a free way up.



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